

A failure of imagination: Competing narratives of 9/11 truth

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Abstract

This essay describes the emergence of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon as an object of conspiratorial intrigue and imagination, offering a snapshot of the “9/11 truth movement” and its various theories as they began to reach full bloom. Theories about the attacks have come to constitute the dominant conspiratorial present – a present that looks remarkably like the mid- and late-twentieth-century past, despite significant changes in information technology and the continuing institutionalization and ironization of conspiracy theory as an influential form of popular politics. In addition to the 9/11 conspiracy community, the essay considers the battle over the 9/11 Commission’s review of the government’s failure to anticipate the terrorist attacks. The Commission engaged in knowing and savvy efforts to respond to conspiracy theories and to preempt popular belief in them, offering an authoritative narrative (or, more precisely, set of narratives) to explain what occurred. Meanwhile, the 9/11 truth movement made equally knowing and savvy efforts to critique the official account, responding with its own efforts to reinterpret and re-narrate the attacks, their causes, and what they signify about the contemporary world. While the 9/11 Commission may have criticized the federal government and its intelligence services for their failures of imagination prior to the attacks, the truth movement criticized the Commission either for a failure of imagination – an explanation for the attacks that could see through the “official” account – or for a quite imaginative cover-up of the hidden truths of 9/11. By considering the clash between official authorities and an active conspiracy community, this essay considers how the movement attempted to form a collective political and scholarly community, producing a blizzard of texts offering narratives that compete with the ones told by the Commission that seek the impossible grail of conspiracy theory: the truth. The essay also considers the effects, if any, of the state’s attempt to preempt and respond to conspiracy theories.

Most scholarship on conspiracy theories considers their growth, circulation, characteristics, and effects.¹ Largely missing from this literature is the question of how the state responds to conspiracy theories.² This short paper considers the fate of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, popularly known as the 9/11 Commission, a ten-member group established by Congress in late 2002. The Commission faced great expectations when it began. Congress, the media, and much of the American public viewed the Commission in the way faithful Americans

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since the early twentieth century have tended to see newly established, independent, expert agencies – as the necessary and perhaps only appropriate tool to investigate a complex public issue. The troubling but nebulous questions of what caused the events of 9/11, the progenitor of an ongoing age of terrorism and a newly vulnerable United States, needed level-headed attention. Lurking beneath these high hopes, however, was the potential not only that the Commission would fail to produce an authoritative report but that such failure would make its report appear to be a cover-up for some hidden truth about a conspiratorial cabal. Would the 9/11 Commission become the next Warren Commission?

If the measure of the Commission's success was its acceptance by elite audiences in Washington and the mainstream media, then its final *9/11 Commission Report* (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, 2004) surpassed all expectations. Largely affirming the conclusion of earlier investigations – that the attacks were caused by terrorists who took advantage of lax security and military defenses as well as inadequate and disorganized intelligence efforts – the Commission found that the government's performance demonstrated, among other things, a “failure of imagination,” or an inability to consider and predict the well-organized and creative efforts of terrorist groups. The *Report* itself was embraced by editorialists, politicians, and book critics, was nominated for a National Book Award, and enjoyed enormous popular success. Early opinion polling about the Commission's performance suggested that the public at least initially approved of the Commission's methods and work.³

But if the measure for its success was how well it protected its legitimacy by avoiding what the Commission's executive director Philip Zelikow described as popular skepticism so “corrosive” to understanding that its “bacteria can sicken the larger body” (Morello, 2004), then the Commission's work has not yet received its final judgment. Two years after the *Report's* publication, journalistic accounts of the attacks' fifth anniversary described a growing “truth movement” of 9/11 skeptics who questioned the official account of the attacks. A handful of somewhat ambiguous polls found widespread, growing public doubt about the official account of 9/11, which rose along with distrust of the Bush administration (Fenster, 2008a: 243–244). While this level of skepticism has subsided more recently as the attacks and the conspiracy theories about them have receded into history, the *9/11 Commission Report* still plays a key role among those who doubt the official explanation of the terrorist attacks.

This paper discusses how the Commission investigated a highly secretive presidential administration and a divided political system while it tried to avoid the Warren Commission's fate as a magnet for conspiracy theorists.⁴ It begins by sketching the official account and introducing the leading conspiracy theories, and then describes the Commission's process and *Report*, before discussing how the *Report* was dismissed by leading authors in the “9/11 Truth” movement.

Contested truths: the official account and the prevailing conspiracy theories

The official account of the 9/11 attacks, as developed in the period immediately following them and as modified by multiple government investigations, identified as the attacks' perpetrator the al Qaeda terrorist organization, led by Osama Bin Laden and acting through 19 hijackers. Three planes hit their intended targets, the two World Trade Center (WTC) towers and the Pentagon, while a fourth, United Airlines Flight 93, crashed in central Pennsylvania when the passengers, who had learned of the earlier plane crashes through cell phone and air-to-ground phone conversations with people on the ground, rushed the plane's cockpit and overcame the hijackers. Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda had already struck American targets prior to September 11, first in a car bomb planted beneath the World Trade Center in 1993 and then in similar attacks on American targets abroad.

Earlier in 2001, American intelligence agencies and domestic law enforcement had gathered intelligence suggesting the possibility of imminent al Qaeda-sponsored attacks. It is unclear whether these pre-9/11 reports provided enough specificity to prompt an effective response to prevent the attacks, even if their significance had been identified and they had been correctly interpreted as part of the same threat. Nevertheless, bureaucratic inertia, turf protection, and incompetence, as well as confusion about the relationships among the many intelligence and law enforcement agencies, inhibited the ability of those agencies to correctly integrate individual intelligence reports and communicate them to responsible and capable authorities within and across appropriate chains of command. Those same issues – confusion as well as bureaucratic inertia and incompetence – inhibited the response of both the military and civilian authorities controlling domestic airspace on September 11, and of the first responders in New York. Above all, the 9/11 Commission concluded, the Bush and Clinton administrations and the agencies in charge of preempting and defending against terrorist attacks demonstrated failures of imagination, policy, capabilities, and management – a colossal set of failures that ultimately made possible the successful September 11 attacks.

Most 9/11 conspiracy theories contest every point of the official account (see, e.g., Fetzer, 2007; Griffin, 2004; Tarpley, 2007). The WTC towers' collapse cannot be attributed to the collision and fire caused by American Airlines Flight 11, which hit the north tower, and by United Airlines Flight 175, which hit the south tower. Rather, the majority of conspiracy theorists allege, the buildings collapsed because of remotely detonated explosives that had been placed in the basement during the weeks prior to September 11. A minority of dissenting voices in the community argues instead that a more advanced military technology, possibly a small nuclear device or a directed energy weapon shot from space, was used to cause the buildings' collapse. Some argue that the planes were remotely controlled; a small number of others argue that no planes hit the towers at all, and that all of the video footage that was shown on television had been digitally manipulated to show phantom aircraft. The Pentagon attack was caused either by a missile or by a plane that was smaller than American Airlines Flight 77, a Boeing 757. Those who might be willing to agree in part with the official account, by conceding that commercial airliners flown by a group of al Qaeda-organized terrorists were indeed the cause of the towers' collapse and/or the damage to the Pentagon, still maintain that the attacks were themselves planned and run by secret US government forces. Most 9/11 conspiracy theorists agree that both the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks succeeded because high level executive branch and military officials ordered military defense operations and civilian air authorities to stand down; and/or because the military was unable to respond in a timely fashion or was confused by a series of war games that had been strategically scheduled for that morning as a distraction. Finally, some argue that United Flight 93, which crashed in Shankstown, Pennsylvania, did not crash as a result of the passengers' efforts but instead was shot down by the US military; others believe that the original Flight 93 had already landed safely that morning in Cleveland and that the wreckage at the scene belonged to another plane.

By definition, every conspiracy theorist agrees that 9/11 was intended to serve as the precipitating event for some larger, more nefarious project. The conspirators planned that the attacks would leave the public fearful and willing to cede greater political and military authority to the president and thus allow the White House to amass power and drastically reduce the public's civil liberties in order to advance their global geopolitical and economic interests. For most theorists, the conspiracy's motives appeared at once murky and obvious, a combination of nationalistic aggression and totalitarian globalism (notwithstanding the apparent incongruity between those two projects) that amalgamate conspiracy theorists' abstract, inchoate fears of concentrated power.

The varieties of 9/11 conspiracy theorists share a general rhetorical and discursive approach to presenting their arguments. Recognizing the debased nature of "conspiracy theory" as a label for their beliefs, truth movement writers engage in reverse labeling: the official account, they argue,

itself constitutes a conspiracy theory that is at once overly simple and excessively complex. Like the Warren Commission's single assassin and one impossibly magic bullet, the official account posits one mastermind, Osama Bin Laden, and a rickety story composed of multiple madmen and an absent civilian and military air defense. The official account also assumes unimaginably widespread official incompetence by an array of bureaucratic culprits, including the CIA, FBI, White House, and Pentagon. Writer David Ray Griffin argues that the official account "can be understood as simply part of a larger *coincidence* theory" that itself requires the coincidence of all these coincidental failures – and he counts at least 38 of them (Griffin, 2004: 145–146). But truth movement writers also embrace the conspiracy theory moniker, claiming to be part of a long-standing, honorable tradition of fearing conspiracy in American history (Tarpley, 2007: 333–343). While they present no unified theory, it is because the truth is hidden, a problem that the 9/11 Commission was supposed to solve.

Commissioning authority

From its start, the 9/11 Commission concerned itself not only with its substantive investigation into the attacks and the events surrounding them, but also with its public legitimacy. To gain both elite and broad public acceptance for its efforts, the Commission needed to conduct itself in ways befitting a truly independent investigatory commission and to establish its authority in a number of ways. Most importantly, it tried to establish *substantive* legitimacy, based on the work it performed under its congressional mandate, by thoroughly reviewing the attacks and their causes. The Commission also tried to establish *formal* legitimacy by acting independently from those branches and agencies of the government that it studied, as well as from partisan political activity that would leave it vulnerable to charges of bias. Finally, and equally important, the Commission *needed to be seen* as legitimate both substantively and formally.

Meeting these goals required several actions that pulled the Commission in opposite directions. It needed complete access to all relevant government officials and documents, no matter how secret or revealing. Anything less than complete access and thorough review – allowing an agency to stonewall, change its story without explanation, or respond incompletely to requests for information, for example, or issuing its final report with redacted material – would encourage conspiracy theorists and increase skepticism about the Commission. To accomplish this, the Commission needed access to officials and classified documents. To gain access, it would have to negotiate with a presidential administration that had already demonstrated a powerful desire to control all information. The Commission had neither the time, budget, nor legal authority to drag the administration to court, and it used its limited power to aggressively demand documents sparingly. It would have to play at least somewhat nicely with the administration and use its allies in Congress, the press, and public to apply political rather than legal pressure. It was also beholden to Congress for time and money, since Congress – which created the Commission – gave it a short deadline and minimal funding. It was hardly in a position to act as anyone's adversary, but needed to build credibility to exercise moral suasion.

At the same time, if the Commission allowed itself to appear to be allied with the administration or any political party or actor, it risked dismissal of its investigation and report as elements of an insufficiently independent and untrustworthy review of the attacks. In order to gain and retain trust, the Commission felt forced to continually demonstrate that it was not tied to any political party; accordingly, it focused its investigation on programmatic and bureaucratic mistakes rather than on the errors of any particular individuals. While this avoided controversy and demonstrated some degree of independence, the Commission's failure to blame the Bush administration or publicly complain about its delayed responses to the Commission's inquiries made it look subservient. Its

hearings, in which it interviewed past and present officials, were open but its deliberations were secret, keeping the public from fully understanding the information it had and choices it was making as it came to its conclusions. “Conspiracy theories are like mushrooms,” Chairman Kean and his co-chair Lee Hamilton later wrote in *Without Precedent*, their account of the Commission, “they grow where there is no light” (Kean and Hamilton, 2006: 256). The Commission was not fully open and it faced a powerful, resistant bureaucracy – two factors about which critics who were not conspiracy theorists complained (see, e.g., Ridgeway, 2005; Shenon, 2008). Despite the fact that, by all accounts, the Commission considered its work and its *Report* to have proven successful and it was largely embraced by political and media elites upon its publication, conspiracy theories grew.

The *Report* tells *two* narratives about 9/11. The first is the story of the hijackings themselves, which it relates in a journalistic, at times even novelistic, style. A tale of dread whose denouement the reader already knows (both from her memory of the event and from the *Report*’s dramatic opening), the *Report*’s first narrative suggests that 9/11 constitutes an almost unavoidable tragedy notwithstanding its foreshadowing. Al Qaeda and its operatives act; America barely reacts. All events circle back to 9/11, whose spectacular horrors capture all attention. The second narrative, which emerges from the analysis and policy prescriptions in the *Report*’s final three chapters, is an authoritative account of a widespread administrative disaster and an uncertain future. This second narrative is a depressing tale – less spectacular and far more banal than the narrative of the attack, and as a result even more frightening. No single state entity bore full responsibility for 9/11 because no entity had sufficient agency to control the operations of the state, much less the safety of its people. Indeed, incapable of organizing and controlling its scattered operations and agents, the state itself seemed to have no agency. And if the state lacks agency, how can it be institutionally reformed? Certain of its conclusions and authoritative in its official authorial role, the *Report* offers little comfort that the Commission’s vulnerable patrons, the political branches that authorized it and the public it ostensibly served, could protect the country from the terrorist threat.

Upon its release, the *Report* was front-page news. And although the Commission’s brief lifespan ended with the *Report*’s release and by law it no longer existed, the Commission continued to influence Washington politics and policy, as well as the public understanding of 9/11. Kean and Hamilton, with the assistance of some of their fellow commissioners, actively traded upon and attempted to extend the Commission’s legitimacy in various non-governmental organizations that lobbied Congress to adopt the *Report*’s proposed legal and governmental reforms (Kean and Hamilton, 2006: 327–346). By continuing to trade on the Commission’s public success, its principal actors sought not only to tell the story of 9/11, but to control the Commission’s own narrative.

Crimes of (C)ommission

Although David Ray Griffin, a popular author within the 9/11 truth movement, welcomed the 9/11 Commission’s establishment (see Griffin, 2004: 149–156, 166–167, 192–196), the 9/11 truth movement dissented immediately and vigorously to the *9/11 Commission Report*, rejecting not only the *Report*’s substantive narratives about what happened on 9/11 but also the Commission’s metanarrative about its own work. By the time the *Report* appeared, the Commission’s reputation within the truth movement had already solidified: it had come to personify the conspiratorial state, and its *Report* did little more than parrot and defend the official account. Ironically, when the truth movement sought to create a puppet to be dragged ceremoniously during protest marches to represent the state’s propaganda and secrecy, it created a large, three-dimensional float in the shape of the commercially available version of the *Report* with a number of large holes in it to signify what critics claimed was the *Report*’s failure to address various conspiracy-related issues.⁵ In a similar

vein, the documentary video *Loose Change* (2005) plays with the *Report's* physical appearance, magically removing the “C” from its book cover in one shot to rename it *The 9/11 omission Report*.

In his book-length critique of the Commission's work, David Ray Griffin (2005) argues that from its political germination to the nomination of its commissioners and the hiring of its staff, the Commission had no legitimacy whatsoever. Even before it began, Griffin claims, the Commission was tied to the president, as its two most important members – its chairman and executive director – were Republicans, and as such were necessarily biased and likely to engage in a cover-up on the White House's behalf. Chairman Kean might have been less implicated in the president's nefarious world than the president's first choice, Henry Kissinger, but he had sufficient ties to that world (as a director of an oil company with investment in Central Asia) to be a safe choice to lead a cover-up (Griffin, 2005: 284–286). But Philip Zelikow, the Commission's executive director, was the real culprit. Griffin claims that Zelikow controlled the investigation and yet had strong personal and professional ties not only to National Security Director Condoleezza Rice, but to the president and vice-president as well – indeed, Griffin asserts, Zelikow was “their man” (Griffin, 2005: 12). Other commissioners also had ties to the Bush administration or the Republican party, or they had private interests with something to gain from the conspiracy, or they were directly connected to Washington corruption and the conditions that enabled the attack (Griffin, 2005: 285–290). In Jim Marrs's words (2006: 156), the Commissioners “should have been called as witnesses” rather than allowed to sit in judgment.

This criticism of the Commission, which was standard within the truth movement, embodies the conspiratorial theory of the state. Seen from the viewpoint of the conspiracy community, the so-called “independent commission” was at once utterly powerless and an appendage of an all-powerful conspiracy. The Commission's creation and inquiry was resisted initially by the Bush administration, and then was starved by Congress of sufficient time and money; but once created, it was staffed by friends and bureaucrats who allowed themselves to be controlled by the conspiracy (Griffin, 2005: 284). The complex conditions under which the state is presumed by academic and lay observers to operate – mechanisms of public accountability such as elections and the press, the rough and tumble of political parties, the competing interests of rational public and private actors, bureaucratic dynamics, the agency of powerful individuals – have merely illusory effects on the state's operations. Although conspiracy theorists make a number of mistakes about how the Commission was constituted (such as who appointed whom) and demonstrate no interest in the complex political and legal context within which the Commission operated, such mistakes and omissions are ultimately irrelevant to their argument – if the state controlled the Commission, its actual personnel and operations are simply beside the point.⁶ The Commission was inevitably going to reach its willfully incorrect conclusions. According to Michael Ruppert (2004: 450), the Commission was “designed, constructed, and functioned to achieve one and only one objective: damage control.”

For the truth movement, the Commission's greatest sin in drafting the *Report* was its failure to acknowledge the existence of alternative theories, much less respond to them. By offering and supporting its own narratives, the Commission only directly addressed conspiracy theories by implication – because it happened this way according to this evidence, the *Report* suggests, it could not have happened any other way. The *Report* either ignores conspiracy theorists' arguments and the evidence they are convinced proves both the invalidity of the official account and the conspiracy's existence, or it relegates such claims to footnotes or passing reference – evidence, Griffin (2005: 11) argues, that the Commission “seems simply to have presupposed the truth of the official conspiracy theory [that is, regarding al Qaeda] from the outset.” In addition to offering startling evidence (some of the alleged hijackers are still alive!), Griffin incorporated evidence not in the *Report* to question its conclusions (photos show no evidence that a Boeing 757 hit the Pentagon!),

spotted reports in the press that conflicted with the Commission's *Report* (someone is lying!), and identified troubling evidence that lower-level FBI employees were frustrated by their superiors' insufficient response to their reports about al Qaeda operations before the attacks. Reinterpreting the Commission's evidence, finding significance in new details, and recasting the Commission's narratives of the attacks, Griffin – and his many fellow critics of the *Report* in the conspiracy community – reframes the conspiracy narrative, placing the Commission at its center.

In fact, by reinterpreting the Commission's evidence and discovering evidence the Commission ignored, 9/11 conspiracy theorists invert all of the Commission's narratives: the al Qaeda terrorists were now either patsies of a state-sponsored conspiracy or mere fiction; the state is an all-powerful, unified entity capable of holding together and keeping secret all of the elements necessary for the greatest covert operation of modern times; and the Commission was merely an arm of the state and a helpful mouthpiece for the conspiracy. The Commission emerges, then, as the reincarnation of the Warren Commission – the fate it sought to avoid but that, thanks to the fatalism of the conspiracy narrative, it was destined to become. Like the earlier government conspiracy whitewash, the 9/11 Commission focused on superfluous and tedious historical and operational data on government agencies and policies rather than on the obvious evidence of conspiracy (Fetzer, 2007: 48–55; Marrs, 2006: 150–152); and, as with the Warren Commission's use of the patsy Lee Harvey Oswald, the 9/11 Commission blamed one man (bin Laden) with a complex, mysterious history and ties to the netherworld of intelligence for a crime whose real perpetrators and cause remain buried in the “deep politics” of conspiracy (Scott, 2007).

The state meets (but does not defeat) the conspiracy theorists

The state could have ignored the conspiracy theories that were beginning to gain attention in the period soon after the 9/11 attacks, and the possibility that such theories could spread to a wider portion of the population. Indeed, President Bush and Congress delayed establishing the Commission and placed limits on its investigation. Transparency, accountability, and presenting an independent and authoritative account of the events were clearly not their highest priority. The Commission, in turn, could have fully ignored the truth movement that was gaining momentum as the Commission's investigation was underway. Although it is unclear precisely how much the movement's efforts affected the Commission's work, we do know that the Commission was aware both of the existence of conspiracy theories and their potential effects on the Commission's short-term legitimacy and long-term reputation. Given the thoroughness of the truth movement's rejection of the Commission's composition and institutional position, it is difficult to imagine that a government-sponsored commission *could* have been sufficiently free of state influence to satisfy conspiracy theorists. Indeed, the truth movement has largely abandoned its call for a “truly” independent commission in the past few years, especially as it has become more certain both of the existence of a conspiracy and of its ability to uncover its existence.⁷ Ultimately, the Commission and the hardcore believers active in the truth movement were talking past each other – which may well be the fate of interactions between, on the one hand, a movement that considers the state to be controlled by a conspiracy, and on the other, state actors whose identities as professional, independent public servants are rejected by conspiracy theorists.

Perhaps, in the end, the 9/11 Commission did all it could to address the inevitable emergence of conspiracy theories surrounding September 11. It may have been unable to persuade the truth movement that it was not directly tied to or controlled by the Bush administration, and it may ultimately have been fated to have its credibility tied to that of an unpopular, secretive administration fighting a difficult, increasingly unpopular war whose rationales have been discredited. This is not intended to be entirely fatalistic. The 9/11 Commission's *Report* and its efforts to engage

and address the public, imperfect though they may have been, represent a vast improvement over the Warren Commission's efforts, and may have been as good and effective as any independent commission can be. The Commission may have successfully limited the spread of 9/11 conspiracy theories, even if it could not stop them. But if, as I have argued elsewhere (Fenster, 2008a), conspiracy theory is endemic to democratic politics and American political culture, then the 9/11 Commission's historical reputation is likely to be contested for generations – perhaps, as time passes, not only by the hardcore of the truth movement but by a broader cross-section of Americans whose distrust of the state leads them to believe the worst of it.

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Notes

1. This includes the literature from cultural studies (including my own) (see, e.g., Birchall, 2006; Fenster, 2008a; Knight, 2001; Melley, 1999), history (see, e.g., Goldberg, 2001; Olmsted, 2009), and political science (Uscinski and Parent, 2014).
2. The exception is Sunstein and Vermeule (2009), which attempts to prescribe strategies for the state to respond to conspiracy theories but does not describe how the state actually responds. As numerous critics of that article have noted (see, e.g., Fenster, 2013), a democratic state would be foolish to risk the criticism it would receive for following Sunstein and Vermeule's advice.
3. A Pew Research Center (2004) poll conducted in the weeks prior to the Report's release in July 2004 found that a majority of those surveyed, and nearly equal percentages of self-identified Democrats (61%), Republicans (62%), and independents (60%), approved of the job the Commission had done, while a much smaller percentage of each category disapproved (24% of Democrats and Republicans and 26% of independents).
4. A longer version of this paper appears as Chapter 7 in Fenster 2008a. A more thorough discussion of the Commission's institutional history and creation is in Fenster 2008b.
5. The float was created by San Francisco Bay Area activists and was used for their protest marches. A series of photographs taken during various marches through San Francisco is available at <http://communitycurrency.org/sfteaparty.html>.
6. Griffin (2005: 284) alleges that the president appointed Zelikow when the statute creating the Commission vests that power in the chairman (in consultation with the vice chairman). Kean and Hamilton (2006: 27–28) describe the choice as theirs. Jim Marrs (2006: 154) claims that Bush appointed Hamilton, but the statute vests that power in the Democratic leader in the Senate, who at the time was Tom Daschle, who indeed appointed Hamilton after George Mitchell, former Democratic senator from Maine, resigned at the same time and for the same reason as Henry Kissinger resigned the chairmanship (Kean and Hamilton, 2006: 12). All of these are mere details, of course.
7. See, for example, the mission statement of 911truth.org, which lists exposing “the official lies and cover-up,” promoting and providing reporting and research, seeking “justice and redress” for those harmed and wronged on 9/11, advancing insight into the conspiracy that organized 9/11 and other social and political ills, and ultimately “to end . . . the regime that made 9/11 happen; and to replace the system that made 9/11 necessary.” Missing from these missions is any further government-sponsored effort to investigate the attacks (911truth.org/our-mission). Some websites, such as the patriotsquestion911.com site, still call for a new independent and impartial investigation, but these are rarer today than they were in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 Commission and the release of its *Report*.

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